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ABSTRACT

The policies and practices of Canadian labor unions in the area of workplace literacy were examined through a comprehensive literature review and site visits to an unspecified number of labor-initiated workplace literacy programs representing different geographic areas, industries and types of occupations, levels of participation of equity groups, and funding and structural arrangements. The study documented that, although labor has clearly developed some workplace literacy initiatives in recent years, their gains have varied based on geographical area of Canada, industrial sector, and firm size. Although Canadian unions were showing increased concern for the provision and delivery of workplace literacy programs, labor's approaches toward workplace literacy remained sporadic and piecemeal. Many of the union-initiated workplace literacy programs involved partnerships with community colleges; public school boards; and various community, private, and nonprofit literacy organizations. Most programs were based on a worker-centered pedagogical orientation whose central premise involves acknowledging and building on workers' own experiences and skills. They tended to rely on conventional literacy and numeracy texts; however, several larger programs also used extracts from books examining labor education and literacy issues. Adequate and sustained funding remained a problem for many programs. A strong union presence proved critical to program governance. (17 references) (MN)

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Workplace Literacy: A Labour Perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores the policies and practices of Canadian unions in the area of workplace literacy. Specifically, it examines the roles that unions play in workplace literacy education and how labour-initiated workplace literacy programs might enhance education for working people and inform critical issues in workforce education.

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Literacy is generally promoted as one of the key attributes necessary for social and economic success in Canada. Specifically workplace literacy–that designed to improve the literacy skills of working adults--is commonly regarded as necessary for social mobility, getting a better job, and having a higher standard of living. Despite this, there exist different definitions of workplace literacy and competing notions about its role in workforce development. Despite several notable exceptions (e.g., Gowen, 1992; Hull, 1997; O'Connor, 1994), the published research on workplace literacy tends to approach issues from either an assumed position of ideological neutrality or an avowedly business or government perspective. More specifically, it rarely considers the very different interests and concerns of working people and seldom includes their views or those of their unions. Yet, for labour, workplace literacy is a crucial issue. Unions have historically been at the forefront of efforts to link literacy policies and outcomes with social and economic issues, particularly as these relate to workers and the workplace. Also, the labour movement has traditionally been one of the primary deliverers of adult education. In fact, some labour organisations have recently begun developing workplace literacy programs for themselves. This paper explores the increase of union involvement in the design and development of workplace literacy programs in Canada. Specifically, it examines the roles that unions play in workplace literacy and how labour-initiated workplace literacy programs might enhance education for working people and inform critical issues in workforce and workplace education.

Context

In recent years, Canada has witnessed an increasing emphasis on workplace literacy education. The most common rationale advanced for such education is economic, particularly in relation to preparation of the workforce and competition with other industrialized countries. Workplace literacy has been described as one of the key components for Canada to maintain or improve its economic welfare and national prosperity (DesLauriers, 1990; OECD, 1997). In an effort to create useful and vital workplace literacy programs, many training "partnerships" have been designed combining business, labour, educational institutions, governments and/or community groups (Taylor, 1997). However, these partnerships tend to privilege the interests of employers and the economy over the perspectives of unions or other labour organizations (Levine, 1997). This has resulted in a plethora of workplace literacy programs that ignore or contradict the long-standing social traditions within Canada's union movement. Specifically, these traditions include a central emphasis on education which focuses, regardless of instructional content, on participatory learning methods and worker empowerment. Thus, labour organizations

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have decried the current emphasis of workplace literacy programs designed solely around the economic returns of literacy and have called for workplace literacy to be framed more around notions of social justice and the empowerment of workers. In labour's view, workplace literacy programs should be developmental, participatory, self-authorizing and democratic in the sense that learners and facilitators are collaboratively engaged in problem posing and problem solving (Johnston, 1994; Levine, 1997). However, despite a long history of involvement in adult education and literacy in Canada, labour's central vision for literacy in general, and workplace literacy in particular, is relatively undeveloped (Canadian Labour Congress, 1997; Dassinger, 1997). Further, the design of union-based workplace literacy programs raises many fundamental questions: about program governance, structure, and financing; program quality and accountability; incentives for learner participation; and about the overall purposes of such education and training. To examine these issues in greater depth, a team of university- and union-based researchers sought to address several questions: the extent to which literacy is identified as a priority issue for unions, the goals of union-initiated literacy policy and practices, the kinds of outcomes emphasized, and the ideology that informs workplace literacy policy and practice. The research also explored several practical issues: the choice of program design, funding arrangements, leadership issues, co-ordination, planning and administration, participation issues, the relationships between labour and its educational partners, the integration of literacy into other spheres of union activity and efforts by unions to foster a learning environment.

Research Design

The research was conducted in two broad phases. Phase one involved a comprehensive review of existing research and literature in workplace literacy policy and practice in Canada, focusing particularly on the policies and practices of Canadian (and to a lesser extent U.S.) unions and their federations. This review led to the preparation and publication of an annotated bibliography on workplace literacy and learning (Nesbit, 2001). Second, in order to contextualize the key issues, the study also examined several examples of labour-initiated workplace literacy programs. Sites were selected from existing workplace literacy programs based on their geographical location and the extent to which they reflect such dimensions as: (i) whether they were considered to be exemplary (ii) the specific industry and employment status of the workers; (iii) the participation of equity groups; and (iv) diversity in their funding and structural arrangements. Research methods included document analysis, site visits and observations, and semi-structured interviews with such key informants as local and national union officials, program administrators, teachers, and learners. All interview data were tape-recorded and transcribed for later analysis. Next, the complete data set was analyzed to generate significant categories, themes, and patterns; test emergent hypotheses against the data; and search for alternative explanations. Finally, drafts of the study's findings are being discussed with labour educators and other workplace literacy coordinators, practitioners, and students.

Findings

Canadian unions are showing an increased concern for the provision and delivery of workplace literacy programs. Tired of narrow corporatist and skill-based approaches to workplace education, concerned with expanding services to members, and recognizing the potential for increased member involvement and activity, many unions are beginning to define

their positions on, and extend their provision of, workplace literacy. As Canada's major union federation, the Canadian Labour Congress (CLC) puts it:

> Unions view their involvement in training, educational and employment services as a strategic tool to reach out to members and potential members and to build and strengthen the union movement. Through these programs, unions can involve new and existing members in participating in union activities and learning about the role and vision of the labour movement (1998, p. 6).

The differences between union-based and corporate educational approaches are more than simple representations of philosophical principles however. In exploring the arrangements under which union-based educational programs are run, there are also a number of structural factors to consider: program delivery methods, use of technology, funding, governance and administrative structures, pedagogies, and curricular materials, A plethora of program delivery alternatives are also available to union workforce literacy programs, often involving partnerships with community colleges, public school boards, community literacy groups, private or non-profit literacy organizations (such as ABC Canada or Laubach International), and private training companies and consultants (Folinsbee, 1994).

For most unions, resources are key. Few can financially or organizationally provide for their own literacy educators trainers and administrators. Consequently they encourage (and often support) workers who wish to upgrade their literacy skills to attend courses at local educational institutions that provide courses in adult basic education. As vital and necessary as many of these programs are, however, they often prove unaccommodating or uninviting to working people. Most workers have families, work shifts, and have transportation issues that make attendance at off-site educational programs inconvenient. Further, many workers resist the more traditional teaching environments that community colleges and public school boards prefer. Workers often come to education and training with barriers that can limit their potential: For many, "returning to a classroom is a reminder that they have been badly served by public education institutions. For others, even if their earlier school experiences have been positive, it may be 20 years or more since they entered a classroom....[These] situations can have a chilling effect on learning" (Brophy & Robertson, 1997, p. 121). As a result, learning environments and delivery methods in union-run workplace literacy programs are typically designed to look and feel much less like conventional classroom situations. They tend to follow adult educational principles such as learner centeredness, a focus on learners' strengths rather than their weaknesses, a more holistic approach to both the learner and the workplace, and a focus on inclusivity and collaboration. Exploring the dominant approaches to instruction, curriculum, and program funding & governance may highlight these principles more clearly.

Instruction

Most union-based programs are based on a worker-centered pedagogical orientation whose central premise involves acknowledging and building on the experiences and skills of workers themselves. The CLC has detailed the components of a worker-centered program as: 1) developmental–incorporating the adult education principle of "life-long learning"; 2) open to all–countering the social fact that those with prior schooling and training are significantly more likely to receive further training than those who do not; 3) based on an understanding of what workers know rather than on what they do not know; 4) enabling workers to have more control over their lives and jobs and better understand their individual and collective rights; 5) involving workers in decision making by fostering a participative rather than a teacher-driven educational

agenda; and 6) being administered and controlled by the union or by a joint union/management committee. (CLC, 1998). Perhaps the most significant structural characteristic of such programs is that learning takes place during work hours and at the worksite: the union usually having negotiated all or most of the course time as paid release from work. Within this overarching framework, most programs employ an array of participatory and democratic methods that promote confidence, solidarity, and respect and that link education with action. In addition to regular classes, unions have also tended to adopt the pedagogical approach of "peer tutoring." Under this arrangement, workers who wish to upgrade their literacy skills work with tutors from their workplace, who have in turn been trained by trainers working with the umbrella program.

Curriculum

Curricular material used on union-based literacy programs tends to originate from one of two sources. Programs generally use sets of conventional literacy and numeracy texts often supplemented with union- and CLC-produced material. Several of the larger programs also made available extracts from books that examine labour education and literacy issues more broadly (e.g., Arnold, Burke, James, & Martin, 1991; Sarmiento & Kay, 1990; Taylor, 1997). However, the general consensus among teachers and administrators was that the texts used were less important than the overall pedagogical approach. "Just picking up a book is a huge challenge," said one teacher, "it doesn't really matter what it is about." While this approach has the advantage of choosing readily available texts that are cheap to purchase and reproduce, it also present one strong drawback. Commonly-available textbooks and union literature tend towards the conservative and uninspiring. They also shy away from challenging dominant and hegemonic approaches to educational and social issues and even union policies and practices. As one union official put it, "Being literate doesn't just mean being able to decipher the words on then page…it means putting them into a social and historical context."

Funding & Governance

The manner in which workplace literacy programs are funded and governed is crucial to their success. In fact, union-based workplace education programs require both adequate and sustained funding and a strong and supportive advisory committee just in order to survive (Dawson & Nesbit, 1999). The provision of stable funding sources that are insulated against the vagaries of provincial and federal politics is a lesson that Canadian labour learned the hard way during the 1990s. Three of the largest workplace literacy projects in Canada–EAST in New Brunswick, BEST in Ontario, and JUMP in British Columbia–were each discontinued through lack of public funding. Those programs that have been best able to withstand political changes are those where unions have been able to bargain for specific trust funds for education and training. Common funding structures involve either a cents/hour formula or funding based on a certain amount of training hours per employee. However, although several powerful unions have been successful in establishing such funding, the majority of Canadian unions have neither been able to negotiate such agreements nor regard funding for education and training as a bargaining priority. The most recent figures suggest that over three-quarters of the collective agreements with 500 or more employees (representing 66% of employees) had no provision at all for education leave for general education (CLC, 1998).

A strong union presence is also required in program governance. For the CLC, this means only participating on a joint committee if the union is a full decision-making partner and only approving a program that supports broad union principles. A strong union presence can have

dramatic effects on decision-making: for example, not agreeing to any model or content that is imposed or because any training necessarily means good training. Or not sanctioning a program where individual results or progress are automatically reported to the employer. Union involvement has already produced some notable successes, as, for example, where established programs for union members have been extended to also include family members.

Discussion

> Today there is a growing tendency within business and on the part of government to frame literacy as a way to increase productivity and competitiveness. If unions do not take hold of the agenda on literacy and develop their own programs, companies will impose their own version of literacy (CLC, 1998, p. 29).

As noble as this sentiment might be, a review of labour's approaches towards workplace literacy shows how sporadic and piecemeal such approaches are. Too few unions bargain over workplace literary and education; only a handful have managed to establish programs for themselves. In too many programs, the goals of critical engagement and worker-empowerment represent ideals rather than reality. Too many working people seeking to improve their literacy skills are forced to take programs and courses where their needs and interests are at best downplayed, at worst, ignored. While labour has clearly developed some initiatives in recent years, their gains are unevenly spread across the country, between industrial sectors, and between large and small employers. Several factors contribute to this: an unaccommodating economic climate, inter-union competition and rivalry, a lack of resources and appropriate materials, an unwillingness to share experiences and information, and poor overall coordination.

It is easy to feel negative. Yet, compared with 10 years ago, there are some remarkably positive changes. Perhaps most significant was the formation in 1996 of the CLC's Workplace Literacy Project, funded in part by public funds. Drawing together workplace literacy coordinators from Canada's most active unions, the Project has provided a forum for regional and inter-union discussions and coordination. It has already produced several excellent publications that provide practical advice and resources towards developing and implementing worker-focused programs and curricula as well as a guide to clear language and communication that is revolutionizing union brochures and newsletters. Through its work, the Project has encouraged workers and their unions to explore how they might better develop cultures of learning–at work and within the union. In practice, this means activities such as incorporating a literacy component into regular workplace and union activities or exploring how literacy activities might contribute to the more traditional tasks of organizing and servicing members. The Project has also enabled unions to view their involvement in training, educational, and employment services as a strategic tool to reach out to members and potential members and to build and strengthen the union movement. It has encouraged unions to organize national conferences specifically devoted to literacy issues–no small feat when funds are tight and there are a dozen other equally-pressing issues–and debate and develop national policies on workplace education and training. One significant feature of these conferences is that they are not just for senior officials in the union hierarchy–but involve union members and learners as well. They have provided a forum not only to debate policy but also to exchange personal stories about literacy and the impact union programs are having on workers' lives. Workers have testified to the self-confidence and respect they have gained and how they have been able to apply for further education and jobs that were previously closed to them.

In these ways, the Workplace Literacy Project has been able to publicize examples of, and endorse, the notions that workplace education is decidedly not a neutral activity and that the goal of improving workers' literacy is not about creating a quiescent and passive workforce or making businesses more profitable. Instead, it promotes how union-based literacy programs can make life better for working people–at work and at home–and can help build a strong union movement. As one union literacy pioneer claims, "literacy as the practice of critical reflection and action is a key element in a strategy for developing a powerful, critically thinking, socially-engaged movement of workers" (Connon-Unda, 2001, p. 16).

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